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ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

This Bono-basher won't bend

Questioning effectiveness and motives of U2 frontman's good deeds raises readers' ire

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Special to The Gazette

Everybody – show-biz types, tech and media moguls, CEOs, politicians – loves to hate critics, those proverbial nattering nabobs of negativity. Attacking rock star Bono for doing Good Global Deeds after Sept. 11 is a recipe for disaster, in terribly poor taste in these sensitive, traumatic, need-to-heal – and war-mongering – times. So why do it? "What kind of creep are you, anyway?"

"I hope you get paid a lot, because who would want to do your job anyway?" quizzed one of dozens of E-mailers responding to my Bono piece that was published Feb. 9. True, these were fans, when all is said and done, and hell hath no fury like a band's fans scorned. Thus I was called jaded, jealous, sad, frustrated, cynical, severely limited, sellout, disgusting, mean-spirited, bitter ("turned my stomach"), "coward and a bastard," a disgrace.

"Basically, I have two words for you: You suck." "I don't know what type of human you are, but I know I hate those like you." "It should be you dying of AIDS in Africa, sir, not some poor child who's never known envy."

Critics expect such barbs. But the terror of many of the 80 letters was that "critics" need not apply for the patriot games people play these days. So much of the self-image of U2's fans is invested in Bono's do-goodism: "rock star saves the day!," to paraphrase Time magazine's U.S. cover story this week. Incredulity greets the notion that he's really rather ineffectual.

The self-righteousness of the rage – how dare you – contrasts with the torpid and supine reaction to the post-9/11 suspension of liberties (and free speech) and wholesale surveillance of the U.S. citizenry.

Any critic worth his or her salt considers it part of the job to rain on parades, fly in the face of conventional "wisdom," not trust a thing – least of all human nature – and not give a damn what the readers think.

The critic IS a "killjoy" or "downer," as nasty as he wants to be and, as Bart Simpson says, "proud of it." It's a dirty job, but somebody has to do it (particularly when most record reviews read like company spew).

These days, the critic's role is extra dodgy: you could get arrested anywhere for saying the wrong thing at the wrong time. As a critic, it was my duty to question how Bono's do-goodism jibes with U.S. patriotism and corporate citizenship.

Hey, maybe Bono's slick. But suggest that his new corporate and political pals might be even slicker – playing him like a violin to increase their street cred – and that Bono drifts surrealistically through history, as obsequious as Zelig or as clueless as Forrest Gump, and it's as if you're giving aid and comfort to the enemy.

True, I paused while reviewing reams of material on Bono's Good Deeds: give the guy a break, he's doing his bit for the human race. "The only thing worse than a rock star," he quipped at a Harvard commencement address last year, "is a rock star with a conscience. I've seen great minds and prolific imaginations disappear up their own ass, strung out on their own self-importance. I am one of them."

This is fine postmodern, ironic nudge-wink, yet Bono suspends disbelief and skepticism, and so are we encouraged to. "Innocence is much more powerful than experience," Bono told Gear last month. That's something a critic could not in good conscience say.

Get with the program, let Bono do the talking. "Grow up" and "get real," advised readers, for whom Bono was beyond adolescent rebellious rock cliché, selflessly sharing his time with these "iffy characters." While demonstrators are arrested or gassed, Bono is fighting some rear-guard action, softening up the leaders and barons and titans and captains of industry, putting a happy face on anti-corporate dissent. How cunning of the pop star!

How crappy of the critic for not climbing on board. It's blasphemous to suggest that Bono might be doing more harm than good in what boils down to a battle of symbolic gestures. He's propping up an illusion, spread by millions of U2 fans, that much is being done regarding Africa and "Third World Debt" (nice slogan). According to many sources, precious little (and inadequate) is closer to the truth.

Symbols last a lifetime. Bono is now forever the guy who spent the better part of a year flashing the Stars and Stripes on stage (and DVD): Sept. 11 turns out to have played as both propaganda and profiteering, a show-biz shtick that goes back to vaudeville. He comes on as just another America-firster, which is the first thing the world can do without. Before 600 million global viewers, he cast his lot with a country that waved its large middle finger in the face of the international community on the Kyoto agreement on global warming, only a month before terror struck.

But surely the U.S. deserves, if I read Bono right, the rally-'round-the-flag treatment from the international community in its hour of need. Even rappers who routinely lambasted the U.S. as racist now drape themselves in the Stars and Stripes. Ultimately, we're all Americans on this bus.

Well, no. The world's critics – everyday citizens, really – express enough independently formed complaints of U.S. arrogance and monolithic loud-footedness to make one take note. A poll conducted before the attacks showed European public opinion way ahead of governments, between 70 and 85 per cent of citizens thinking the U.S. "does what's only in its own interests." The vast divergence of opinion on U.S. foreign policy around the world is something the U.S. tries to conceal from its citizens.

So what's it all about, Bono? Does he want to pull the U.S. by the lapel into the big world by pampering its pain, hobnobbing with bigwigs, playing the "system"? Does he distance himself from the activists behind the barricades by embracing the so-called Heartland Values – based more often than not on blithe brutal ignorance of the world at large? The heartland's airports and other public spaces bleed red, white and blue, patrolled by uniformed protectors. Land of the free? I beg to differ.

These are queasy questions critics ask. (Even if it's only for the sake of asking them.) And, I darkly wondered out loud, was there something else at play? Much of U2's cred – commercial currency – comes from the band's pre-eminent position as rock do-gooders, hitched on to the U.S. vision of good vs. evil. What if U2 wanted a lock on its status as America's Band – sort of a hip Hootie and the Blowfish? Bono always was a sucker for U.S. icons – now he is one.

The Elevation Tour waltzed into America's heart with militaristically precise bombast (capped by U2's four Grammy wins this week). Is it so out of bounds to mention the Benjamins? So thought many readers: *Eph, how could you!*

This is where the critic becomes cast as an "evil-doer" (in Bush-speak). "Perhaps if critics like you did not exist," one reader reasoned, "more do-gooders would not have the stigma of 'selling out' mixed up with changing the world by any means necessary." By any means necessary: war-speak and peace-talk as hallmarks of the 9-11 era.

Shut up, and be part of the solution, not part of the problem, ad nauseam. "Why don't you get out of your La-Z Boy and go do something significant in the world, Dude." It's the "let Bono do it" passive aggression. Don't rock the boat. Meanwhile, "surveillance is in the saddle," William Safire says in the New York Times. "So far, the reaction has been a most un-American docility."

"Look at the glass half full, not half empty," one reader advised. Well, I like my truth a little, as Tina Turner put it, "rough," ripe, and rock'n'roll. I like a little anarchy in the stew, and oh-so mature U2 fans can squawk all they want about "growing up." We need some punk 'nads now; Bono's patriotic piffle doesn't rate.

My invocation of Jerry Lee Lewis wailing Whole Lotta Shakin Goin' On hit sour notes; how dare I mention this notorious alleged wife-killer and cribpapa in the same breath as prime Nobel Peace Prize material Bono. Oops, I did it again!

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Bono on the March 4 cover of Time's U.S. edition. "So much of the self-image of U2's fans is invested in Bono's do-goodism that incredulity greets the notion that he's really rather ineffectual," critic Juan Rodriguez says.

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